



<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Cervical Cancer

Q: What is cervical cancer?

A: Cancer is a disease that happens when body cells don't work right. The cells divide really fast and grow out of control. These extra cells form a tumor. Cervical cancer is cancer in the cervix, the lower, narrow part of the uterus (womb). The uterus is the hollow, pear-shaped organ where a baby grows during a woman's pregnancy. The cervix forms a canal that opens into the vagina (birth canal), which leads to the outside of the body.

Most cases of cervical cancer are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a virus that is passed from person to person through genital contact, most often during vaginal and anal sex. You are more likely to get HPV if you have multiple partners. However, any woman who has ever had genital contact with another person can get HPV. Most women infected with HPV will not get cervical cancer. But, you are more likely to develop cervical cancer if you smoke, have HIV or reduced immunity, or don't get regular Pap tests. Pap tests look for changes in the cervical cells that could become cancerous if not treated.

If the Pap test finds serious changes in the cells of the cervix, the doctor will suggest more powerful tests such as a colposcopy (kol-POSS-koh-pee). This procedure uses a large microscope called a colposcope (KOL-poh-

skohp). This tool allows the doctor to look more closely at the cells of the vagina and cervix. This and other tests can help the doctor decide what areas should be tested for cancer.

Q: Why should I be concerned about cervical cancer?

A: Cervical cancer is a disease that can be very serious. However, it is a disease that you can help prevent. Cervical cancer happens when normal cells in the cervix change into cancer cells. This normally takes several years to happen, but it can also happen in a very short period of time.

Q: How can I help prevent cervical cancer?

A: Scientists have developed a vaccine that helps prevent certain types of HPV. The vaccine helps protect against the types of HPV that most often cause cancer. Right now, the HPV vaccine (called Gardasil®) is only given to females ages 9 to 26. The vaccine is given in three doses (shots) over a six-month period. Women who are pregnant should not get the HPV vaccine until after the baby is born.

The HPV vaccine works best in females who haven't been exposed to the virus. It protects against four types of HPV. Studies show the vaccine prevents about 70 percent of cervical cancers if it is given to women and girls before they have sex for the first time. It also protects against about 90 percent of genital warts. The shot works for at least five years, maybe longer. It is still under study.

About 30 percent of cervical cancers will not be prevented by the vaccine.



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But there are other ways to help prevent cervical cancer. By getting regular Pap tests and pelvic exams, your doctor can find and treat the changing cells before they turn into cancer. Practicing safer sex is also very important. Below are things you can do to help protect yourself against HPV and cervical cancer.

- **Don't have sex.** The best way to prevent any STI is to not have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- **Be faithful.** Having sex with just one partner can also lower your risk. Be faithful to each other. That means that you only have sex with each other and no one else.
- **Use condoms.** HPV can occur in both female and male genital areas that are not covered by condoms. However, research has shown that condom use is linked to lower cervical cancer rates. Protect yourself with a condom *every* time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. ■

For More Information

To learn more about cervical cancer, please visit the following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web sites:

<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/knowledge>

<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical>

You can also find out more about cervical cancer by contacting [womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov) at 1-800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

National Cancer Institute, NIH, HHS

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Vaccines for Cervical Cancer

Phone number: (800) 422-6237

Internet address: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/hpv-vaccines>

National Cancer Institute Cancer

Information Service, NIH, HHS

Phone number: (800) 422-6237

Internet address: <http://cis.nci.nih.gov>

National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, CDC, NIH

Phone number: (800) 232-6348

Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/index.htm>

American Cancer Society

Phone number: (800) ACS-2345

Internet address: <http://www.cancer.org>

Gynecologic Cancer Foundation

Phone number: (800) 444-4441

Internet address: <http://www.thegcf.org>

Content last updated January 1, 2009.